

By Roy Roberson

Thursday, February 17, 2011

Included among the groups represented at the 2011 Southeast Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association meeting were blackberry and raspberry growers, peach growers, vegetable growers, watermelon growers, Vidalia onion growers, organic growers, muscadine grape growers, blueberry growers, pecan growers, strawberry growers, sweet corn growers and roadside marketers.

A rousing speech by Georgia Congressman Sanford Bishop highlighted the recent Southeast Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association meeting in Savannah, Ga.

Bishop, a multi-term congressman from south Georgia, has been a staunch supporter of agricultural programs in the Southeast during his tenure in the House. He spoke out against government regulations that limit farmers' ability to produce enough food to feed the world.

Proposed changes to the H2A farm labor program could have devastating effects on smaller acreage growers in the Southeast. Bishop says about 40 percent of the fruit and vegetable growers in his district use H2A labor.

Changing the minimum wage component of the program, in particular, would put many growers out of business, because of the labor intensive nature of growing fruits and vegetables.

"We must end these frivolous lawsuits brought forth by migrant leader legal service programs. I will continue to bring these issues to the constant attention of Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis.

"Last summer we went directly to her and tried to make a case for our farmers in the Southeast. Though we didn't get everything like we want it, we have made progress and we will continue to press the issue to provide some relief for our farmers," Bishop says.

The Georgia congressman says he is particularly driven to help the many farmers who were impacted by the salmonella scare that was widely attributed to tomatoes. Though peppers, not tomatoes, proved to be the source of the outbreak, tomato growers across the Southeast suffered greatly because of the misinformation.

“When it was all said and done, the FDA’s warning against eating tomatoes cost Georgia tomato growers \$14 million and tomato growers nationwide more than \$125 million lost,” Bishop said.

“Greg Murray, a Bainbridge, Ga. tomato grower came to Washington and testified before Congress and explained at the farmer level the problem of not having a good, sound policy in place to deal with food-borne disease issues.

“As a consequence of his and other farmer input, we will continue to work with Secretary Vilsack and other government officials to put into place policies that will prevent this kind of devastation for our farmers from ever happening again,” he added.

Bishop says the upcoming 2012 farm bill will be more difficult than ever before. “This is a census year and every year we move toward a farm bill and we take a census more and more representatives come from urban areas.

“Fewer and fewer elected politicians represent production agriculture, therefore, fewer understand what it takes to produce the highest quality and most abundant food and fiber in the industrialized world. They take it for granted,” Bishop warns.

Keep in touch with elected officials

“I cannot over-emphasize how important it is that you as individual growers and as commodity groups constantly and meaningfully stay in contact with your elected officials in the House and the Senate. Keep them aware of what is at stake with agriculture and help them find meaningful ways to help you continue to do what you do better than farmers anywhere in the world,” Bishop said.

During the meeting, Georgia Extension Entomologist Alton 'Stormy' Sparks was presented the organizations Donnie Morris Excellence in Extension Award for his work in insect management that benefits fruit and vegetable growers. In accepting the award, Sparks said, "We work for you, grower input is vital to the success of our research and Extension programs — always let us know how we can help you."

Ridge Springs, S.C., peach grower Chalmers Carr was named Mr. Peach for 2011 by the Southeastern Peach Growers Association. Carr, whose family grows 4,000 acres of peaches, urged growers to follow Congressman Bishop's urging to stay involved with the industry and with politicians who make laws that affect the industry.

Stanley Culpepper, University of Georgia Extension weed specialist, was presented with the prestigious 2010 Montreal Protocol Award by the Environmental Protection Agency. "I beat on the EPA more than anybody in this room, but I want you to know they do listen and they do try to help us," Culpepper said in accepting the award.

Robert Dasher, a Georgia fruit and vegetable grower, was recognized for winning the Sunbelt Expo 2010 Farmer of the Year Award. In accepting the award from Sunbelt Expo Executive Director Chip Blaylock, Dasher acknowledged the importance of Congressman Bishop's remarks, touching off another standing ovation.

Wendy Brannen, marketing manager for the Vidalia Onion growers was presented the Packer 25 Award, by The Packer Magazine for her role in creating a series of add using the popular Shrek character to promote Vidalia onions.

Over 2,000 farmers and agricultural industry leaders attended the 2011 annual meeting. In addition, industry-supporting companies filled to over-flow the Savannah Convention Center, providing information on virtually any business that touches the fruit and vegetable industry in the Southeast.

The growth of the Southeastern Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association has been nothing short of phenomenal.

“When we held our first annual meeting back in the early 1990s, we had about 300 attendees, recalls Association Director Charles Hall. Then we joined with the Georgia and South Carolina peach councils, then the organic growers and roadside and farmers market groups,” he notes.

Included among the groups represented at the 2011 annual meeting were blackberry and raspberry growers, peach growers, vegetable growers, watermelon growers, Vidalia onion growers, organic growers, muscadine grape growers, blueberry growers, pecan growers, strawberry growers, sweet corn growers and roadside marketers.